DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 462 CS 007 704

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TITLE Learning to Read and Write: The Influence of Oral and Written Language Differences.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (73rd, Denver, CO, November 18-23, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Language; Comparative Analysis; Elementary Education; Instructional Improvement; *Language Processing; Language Skills; *Learning Strategies; Literacy; *Oral Language; *Reading Skills; *Writing Skills; *Written Language

ABSTRACT

To answer important questions for educators concerning language skills, this paper argues that children must acquire new skills in order to process written language, and that the need for developing new skills stems from differences between oral and written language that are more fundamental than differences in mode. The paper first describes how oral and written languages differ in terms of background knowledge, shared knowledge, multiple channels, feedback, and shared time and space, and how the absence or presence of these features is a matter of degree. It then focuses on examples of children confusing the strategies in their language activities, and problems they encounter in each one. Finally, it discusses the implications for instruction that these strategies suggest, including talking on the telephone, dictating narratives about experiences not shared by teacher or class, journal writing, and show and tell. The paper suggests that teachers need to help children acquire a repertoire of written language strategies and, at the same time, help them become aware of the pragmatic differences between various types of oral and written discourse. (CRH)

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LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE:

THE INFLUENCE OF ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

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Presented as a paper at the Annual Meeting of

NCTE, Denver, Colorado, 1983

CS 007 704

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LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE:
THE INFLUENCE OF ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

One issue underlying much of the debate about the function of schooling is the degree to which school is, or should be, continuous with the experiences children have at home. On one hand, it has been argued that because children have well developed social and linguistic skills before they enter school, schooling should build upon and use these skills in order to continue their development. From this perspective, home skills are viewed as providing the foundation upon which school skills are built. On the other hand, it has also been argued that what is learned in school is different in kind from the skills children already have when they enter school, and that there is a basic discontinuity between home and school. Knowledge acquired in school is said to be decontextualized, that is, separated from the practical knowledge and experiences of children (Olsen, Goody and Watt, 1968; Cook-Gumperz, 1976).

The discontinuity-continuity issue has often been treated as a dichotomy, with schooling viewed as either continuous or discontinuous. However, it seems clear that school is both continuous and discontinuous with the knowledge and experiences of children. Children must use what they already know as well as acquire new knowledge in order to succeed. The important questions for educators are: What skills do children bring to school? What new skills must be acquired? How do these skills interact? What are effective ways to teach new skills while building on old skills?

One area where these questions are particularly relevant is in the acquisition of literacy skills. Much of the discussion surrounding the discontinuity-continuity issue has focussed on the acquisition of literacy because it is the major focus of schooling. With respect to the first question posed above, it is clear that children bring highly developed language skills to school and to the task of learning to read and write. However, these are oral language skills. In this paper, we will argue that children must acquire new skills in order to process written language. We will also argue that these skills include more than decoding skills which involve translating from one mode to another, and that the need for developing new skills stems from differences between oral and written language which are more fundamental than differences in the mode.

With respect to the question of the ways new and old skills interact, we will suggest that young children initially depend upon their oral language strategies when processing written language. This dependence is only natural, and it is important and helpful where oral and written language require the same strategies. However, it is not productive when the requirements of oral and written language differ. When the requirements

differ, children may use oral language strategies inappropriately in situations calling for the use of written language strategies. This phenomenon appears in young children's early writing and reading as well as in oral language activities where the use of decontextualized language is required. Examples of this phenomenon will be examined with respect to several aspects of oral and written language differences, including examples from data collected in a study of a first grade class conducted by Gumperz and Simons (1981). In the concluding section of this paper, we will discuss the implications of this phenomenon for the last question posed above: What are effective ways of teaching new skills while building upon old skills?

ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Oral and written language differ in a number of ways in addition to the fact that one is spoken and the other written. They differ in function, structure, content, and the channels used to convey information (Rubin, 1978; Schallert, Kleiman, and Rubin, 1977; Chafe, 1982). Moreover, many of the differences between oral and written language are the result of fundamental differences in the context of the communication. In typical oral language conversations, for example, participants share the same physical context or situation. In written communication they do not. Further, in typical oral conversations, and particularly in conversations involving children, participants are likely to know one another and to share personal as well as general cultural background knowledge. In written communication, on the other hand, although participants may share general cultural knowledge, they are much less likely to have a history of shared experience.

As can be seen in Figure 1, these two fundamental differences in the context of the communication (Level I), lead to secondary features of the context (Level II), which in turn lead to differences in the language of the communication itself. For example, at Level I, BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE refers to knowledge which the speaker or writer can assume to be shared or understood by the receiver of the message. This knowledge includes actual shared experiences as well as general cultural knowledge. At Level II, the feature SHARED KNOWLEDGE refers to the degree to which the producer and the receiver of the message share knowledge of each other, including a background of shared experience. If such knowledge is shared, the producer of the message may refer directly to this knowledge or omit it altogether since it can be assumed to be shared. When background information is not shared, as it frequently is not in written communications, the information must be explicitly introduced. As a consequence, written language is typically more explicit, detailed and complete than oral language.

The feature MULTIPLE CHANNELS refers to modes of communication. In oral language, it is possible for part or almost all of the message to be carried nonverbally and by intonation because the participants can see and hear each other. In other words,

participants can use multiple channels to communicate. In written language, the message must be carried by the lexical channel with some help from punctuation as a substitute for intonation. Because the channels that can be used depend upon whether or not the situation is shared, we have represented this feature as a secondary feature in our diagram.

The feature FEEDBACK refers to the potential for receiving response to the communication, and PLANNING refers to the amount of time the sender of the message has to plan what is to be said (Ochs, 1979). In oral conversations, there is immediate feedback but no time for planning. The combination of these two features produces language which is fragmented and characterized by short stretches of disjointed and structurally simple discourse. In written language there is typically no immediate feedback, but there is more time to plan the discourse. In combination, the lack of feedback and the increased amount of planning time result in longer stretches of coherent discourse which is more integrated and structurally complex than oral language (Chafe, 1982).

SHARED TIME AND SPACE refers to whether or not the participants share the same temporal and physical context. In oral language conversations, the producer and receiver of the message typically share the physical situation. As a consequence, language can refer directly to the physical situation in which it is produced, and can be anchored to the time it is produced. This kind of language has been called "situation dependent" (Smith, 1982). In written communication, on the other hand, participants do not communicate in a shared situation. They cannot refer to objects in a shared situation because they are separated in space, and adjustments must be made for separation in time.

It should be kept in mind that the absence or presence of these features in the context of the communication is a matter of degree rather than an all or none phenomenon. It all depends, of course, upon the particular type of oral or written communication being considered. Letters, for example, provide a kind of feedback, although it is not immediate. It should also be kept in mind that the features identified above interact with one another to produce language differences. They are not discrete features. However, these features represent fundamental differences between the language experiences children have before they enter school, and the experiences they will subsequently have in the process of becoming literate. In order to become successful readers and writers, children will have to acquire new skills to deal with these differences.

SHARED SITUATION

As mentioned above, one consequence of the situational differences between oral and written language, is in the potential for referring to the participants and objects in the situation. This type of reference is called exophoric reference

(Halliday & Hasan, 1976). For example, if in a conversation one speaker says: "Can I put it over there?", the interpretation of the words "I," "it," and "there," depends upon knowing about or being in the situation in which the words are spoken. Exophoric uses of such terms are also called "deictic," because they must be interpreted in relation to a particular time, location and speaker. In contrast to exophoric reference, in endophoric reference, words are coreferential with other words in the text itself. For example, in the sentence: "Bill walked over to the table and he put the book on it," the words "he" and "it" are used endophorically. "He" is coreferential with "Bill," and "it" is coreferential with "table." Words which are used to refer can be used exophorically or endophorically, and both types of reference are used in both oral and written language. However, endophoric reference is used much more frequently in written language because the situation of its production is not available to the reader.

One problem for children in learning to read is learning to interpret words endophorically when they are accustomed hearing words used exophorically in conjunction with situational cues. Thus in the sentence "Sally said to Jill, 'Come to my house tomorrow.' " (Rubin, 1978), children must realize that "my' refers to "Sally"; that "tomorrow" refers to the day after the words are spoken, that "come" indicates that Sally will be at home the next day, and finally that Jill will come from some location other than Sally's house. When reading, children must be able to interpret the words in the text of the narrative in relation to Sally, and to the purely hypothetical moment she speaks.

Evidence that dependence upon the physical context is a problem for reading acquisition comes from a detailed experimental study by Murphy (1983). She asked second grade children to interpret deictic words in both oral and written language. In her study, real people orally acted out a situation which was also described in a written text. The same target sentences were used in both situations. An example follows.

> John and Sam and Bill went to a party.
> Everyone had plates.
> A penny was under one of the plates.
> "Sam," said Bill.
> "Get the penny under my plate."

Children were asked who had the penny. In the oral situation, the word "my," can be interpreted exophorically, while in the written text it must be interpreted endophorically. Murphy found that the oral condition was easier than the written one. Without the situational support found in the oral language situation, the task was harder. This study thus provides evidence that the lack of a situational context in written language causes problems for beginning readers.

Children's use of words for reference also indicates that

some children depend on oral language strategies. For example, in the Gumperz and Simons study (1981), when first grade children were asked to tell an adult about a short film (Chafe, 1980) which they had seen but the adult had not, some children showed the action of the characters through imitation, e.g., "The boy went like this." Other students, in contrast, used the strategy of lexical elaboration, e.g., "The boy hit the ball on the string." While the former is not inappropriate in a face-to-face situation, it illustrates the difference between a typical oral language strategy and one which would be appropriate for written language.

In some cases, however, children use oral language strategies in situations which clearly call for the use of written language strategies. In another task, where the same first grade children were asked to describe a set of geometric figures into a tape recorder so that a classmate could pick out the figures on the basis of the taped description, we found descriptions like the following:

> This one just looks like ...something right here like this
> It looks like a monster... here's his lip and here's his paw.
>
> That one looks like a square... it's like that.

Since the sender and the receiver were separated in time and space and could not see one another in this task, the use of reference to the physical context was inappropriate. In this task, the production of deictic reference to the physical context e.g. "this", "that", "here's" was found to be negatively correlated with reading achievement, suggesting that children who tend to use an inappropiate oral strategy when a more written one is required will have trouble learning to read (Simons and Murphy, 1983).

Evidence that children initially depend upon oral language strategies and that children are in a process of transition from oral to written language strategies also can be found in children's writing behavior. For example, King and Rentel report a sharp drop in the use of restricted exophoric reference by tne end of the second grade (King and Rentel, 1982).

SHARED KNOWLEDGE AND DEFINITE REFERENCE

The examples in the preceding section have shown ways in which words can be used to refer directly to the context of the situation in which language is produced and received. In a similar way, reference can be made to knowledge which is shared between the sender and the receiver of a message, including general cultural background knowledge as well as more personal kinds of knowledge such as knowledge of a particular shared experience. As mentioned, in most oral language situations, and particularly in situations involving children, there tends to be more shared knowledge because participants often know one

another. Talk tends to be concerned with shared experiences, and feedback can be used to ask for more information when not enough is provided. In written language, these factors are diminished or nonexistant. Young children, however, tend to rely on the strategy of assuming that their listener shares background knowledge. Moreover, in some cases children use signals that indicate shared knowledge in situations where it is not shared. For example, shared knowledge is commonly signaled by definite reference. In the children's narrative retellings of the film mentioned above, some children used the definite article and other forms of definite reference inappropriately, treating information about the film which the listener had not seen as shared information, as can be seen in the following examples:

> the lamb....and the lamb has ate ...one apple So then... um...this boy came and stopped by the tree ... and the man wasn't looking...the whole basket and he took the whole basket.

> and these other three boys. they was waiting for him. they was making him do it. just cause with that thing.

In the first example, the use of the definite article indicates that the speaker assumes that the listener has seen the film and knows which "lamb," "tree," and "basket" are being referred to. In the second example, it is necessary to have seen the film in order to interpret "him", "it," and "that thing". In these examples, the children are relying on an oral language strategy in a situation where it is inappropriate.

Direct reference to shared knowledge also occurs in children's early attempts at writing, as can be seen in the following entry from a first grade child's written journal.

> I like the monkey and the rabbit and the skeleton.

Although this child might be correct in assuming that the receiver of the message (the teacher) would know what he was referring to, his strategy contrasts sharply with that of other children who provided an explicit context for their evaluations. An example follows:

> We saw a puppet show today. I liked the monkey and the rabbit and the skeleton.

The first example above illustrates the use of language strategies which can be appropriate and efficient when knowledge is shared. When knowledge is shared, it can be omitted or referred to directly. However, when background knowledge is not shared, the use of these strategies can interfere with communication. When children come to school, they will be required to interact with increasingly wider circles of individuals and they will have to give up their dependence on shared background information. Similarly, when learning to write, they will have to learn to explicitly supply information that their readers cannot

be assumed to share.

MULTIPLE CHANNELS

As mentioned above, another dimension where there is a shift in strategies from oral to written language is in the channels used for conveying information. In written language, the lexical channel must carry the burden of the communication, while in oral language, intonation and nonverbal information such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language help to carry the message. Intonation is used to chunk sentences into phrases, distinguish given from new information, and provide contextualization cues which indicate how sentences are to be the interpreted (Gumperz, 1982). Punctuation does not entirely compensate for the lack of intonation in written language. When learning to read, children must give up their dependence upon multiple channel signalling and use the syntax and semantics of written language alone.

The transition from oral to written language strategies can be seen in children's reading behavior. The task in reading is to learn to chunk the text into phrase sized units without having intonation available to help. Readers must depend solely on syntactic and semantic clues. The task is further complicated by the fact that written language tends to have different syntactic structures than oral language. Beginning readers cannot simply transfer their oral language patterns onto written text. The traditional oral reading checklist of problems which includes word by word reading, ignoring punctuation, short eye-voice span, and inadequate phrasing all may indicate, in addition to decoding problems, trouble in chunking text without intonational cues.

Evidence that the lack of intonational cues is a problem in reading acquisition comes from studies by Kleiman, Winograd and Humphrey (1979) and Clay and Imlach (1971). The former showed that poorer readers are helped by the intonational support of having the text read to them when reading, while better readers are not. Presumably, better readers are less dependent upon intonation, having already made the shift, while poorer readers are still having trouble chunking and need the support that intonation provides. Clay and Imlach (1971) found that poor first grade readers produce word-by-word intonation in oral reading which indicates they are not sensitive to the chunking cues that are provided by the syntax. Better readers produce more appropriate intonation indicating that they can use syntax alone.

Evidence of the problems with intonation also appears in children's writing as they attempt to compensate for the lack of intonational and non-verbal cues by graphic means. They represent intonation by making stressed words larger or darker, underlining or capitalizing them, and they frequently use interjections, dialogue, and frequently use interjections, dialogue, and exclamation marks (Graves, 1983).

FEEDBACK AND PLANNING

The lack of feedback and turn-taking in written language means that the discourse produced must be longer, more coherent, and topically organized. Since conversations are joint productions by the conversationalists, with short turns and shifting topics, beginning writers must learn new patterns of discourse organization. The writer must, in effect, produce one long turn which will be understandable without the benefit of feedback which would allow him to adjust the message. For the beginning writer, the task is to produce coherent, topically organized discourse, and young children find this a difficult task in spite of the fact that there is more time to plan the discourse.

The difficulties children encounter when they are developing this skill can be seen in a variety of school activities, including sharing in the early grades, oral narratives later on, and written accounts of their experiences when they fail to make their sentences topically related. The following example of this phenomenon is taken from the journal entry of one of the first grade children.

today we talked about the carnival.
today I Played Soccer
today Chris got a cut.

In the example above, the child merely lists activities that occurred on the same day. No attempt is made to elaborate on a particular topic. Later in the year, however, children began to produce more extensive commentary on a single topic and to employ cohesive ties to mark the relationships between sentences. Examples follow:

Lexical repetition:	Today I go to drama. At drama we are going to have rehearsal for a play.
Reference:	today we saw a movie. It was about noise.
Ellipsis:	I Played Soccer. Bart Didnt Play. (soccer)

The changes in the children's journal entries during the course of the year suggest that they were in the process of acquiring language strategies which would be appropriate for written text. Not all of the children were as successful as others however, and several children continued to produce disjointed and incoherent texts. Moreover, the problem noted here is not confined to the writing of very young children. In the later grades, English teachers continue to complain of the lack of topical coherence in the essays of their students.

In addition to different patterns of discourse organization, oral and written language tend to have different syntactic structures. Many of the syntactic differences between oral and

written language are the result of differences in the amount of feedback and planning time available. Written language is more compact and integrated (Chafe, 1982). It has more explicit connections between clauses, more passive and participial constructions, more nominalizations, and more dependent complement and relative clauses (O'Donnell, 1974; Loban, 1976; Driemann, 1962). On the other hand, oral language is characterized by short bursts of speech, and for this reason, it is typically more fragmented and loosely organized than written language. Sentence structure is less complex, and series of independent clauses are often strung together with no connectives or with "and" or "then." (Chafe, 1982).

When children learn to read and write, they bring expectations about structure that are formed by their oral language. These expectations many conflict with the structures found in written language. In reading, evidence of these expectations appear in children's reading errors when they "translate" written structures into more familiar oral language structures. Examples follow:

1. Soon the dog next door came out of the house. then When he saw the snow dog he said, "Bow-wow".

2. I like your songs. and I like your happy face.

3. Mary, was walking to her friend's cabin, and saw Sally.

4. Sally and Mary, played playing at the lake, and enjoyed their vacation with

Sam, Mary's poodle.

5. " I want to go." Jim said said Jim.

In each of these cases, the readers' errors change a written structure into one that conforms to oral language based expectations. In #1, a dependent clause is made into an independent clause, a construction that is more typical of oral language. In #2, two independent clauses are connected by the conjunction "and," a conjunction found more commonly in oral language. In #3 and #4 complex sentences with participial phrases are converted into simple clauses connected by a conjunction. Finally in #5 the word order is changed to conform to oral language word order. Leu (1981) has shown that children who make more of these kinds of errors are poorer readers than those who make fewer of these kinds of errors. Leu's findings suggest that poor readers may be depending upon oral language strategies.

Evidence of children's reliance on the structures of oral language appears in their writing as well as their reading behavior. Young children tend to write simple sentences such as those in the examples above. Generally, their sentences are devoid of the syntactic complexity that characterizes written language. Through exposure to "literate" speech as well as print, most children will eventually acquire a repertoire of more complex syntactic structures as well as strategies for marking the relationships between sentences. Research has documented growth in syntactic complexity (Loban, 1976) and the development of cohesion (King and Rentel, 1982). However, some children make less progress than others, and many of the problems associated with the use of oral language strategies continue to be problematic throughout the grades.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

The several different dimensions of oral and written language differences discussed here provide a useful tool for examining children's language skills. When one examines children's language with respect to these dimensions, it becomes evident that children must acquire new skills for the production and comprehension of written language, and that these skills include more than decoding skills. In addition to decoding skills, children need to learn how to process language without the support of information from the immediate physical context and the aid of nonverbal cues and intonation. Children also need to learn how to process language without the support of the kind of background information shared by conversationalists who know each other well. Finally, children also need to learn how to produce sustained discourse without benefit of feedback, and to deal with the more complex syntactic structures which are typical of written language. The child's task is to acquire these new skills. The teacher's task is to assist in the acquisition process. Thus the important question for teachers is the last question posed at the beginning of this paper: What are effective ways to teach new skills while building upon old skills?

We would like to suggest that features of oral and written language differences, including those discussed above, can provide a useful framework for devising instructional activities to help children acquire written language skills. Since children come to school with oral language skills, and since new skills must be acquired, activities which manipulate one or another (or several) of the features associated with particular written language skills should be helpful in fostering the development of new skills. Activities which manipulate oral and written language features could thus serve as a bridge between oral and written language skills. Talking on the telephone, for example, separates the sender and the receiver of the message in space, requiring the child to fill in relevant background information about the situation in which the language is produced. Talking about, or dictating narratives about experiences not shared by the teacher or the class also require the child to fill in relevant back-

ground information, and the child has the benefit of feedback in both cases if he omits relevant information.

The classroom activity known as "sharing" or "show and tell" provides another opportunity for this kind of interaction to take place. In this activity, children are encouraged to talk about experiences they have had and/or to discuss objects they "show" to the group. When children fail to be explicit, the teacher has the opportunity to intervene. Michaels and Cook-Gumperz (1981) argue that this activity is implicitly designed to bridge the gap between oral and written language skills. Their analysis of one teacher's questioning strategies shows that the teacher's notion of adequate sharing follows a literate model.

Children's early writing experiences can also be made interactive, allowing for direction by the teacher. The teacher's written feedback can, in addition to correcting errors, provide a stimulus for the child to develop topically coherent discourse. For example, Kreeft (1984) has demonstrated how careful questioning by the teacher in response to journal entries can lead children to supply relevant details and thus extend and elaborate their discourse on a single topic or related topics.

The activities described above retain some of the features of oral language. Talking on the telephone, for example, separates the sender and the receiver of the message in space but not in time. Sharing is an interactive exchange, and dictated narratives as well as journal entries can be modified through the teacher's prompting questions. Because these activities have some, but not all of the features of written language, they reduce the cognitive demands of the task for the child, and they allow the teacher to focus on the development of particular aspects of written language skills. What we are suggesting here is similar to the work of Bereiter and Scardamalia who have suggested various instructional techniques for reducing the demands of particular written language tasks based on their analysis of oral and written language differences (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1982).

The examples of children's language discussed in this paper show that children initially depend upon oral language strategies and that in some cases their use of such strategies is inappropriate. Thus part of the teacher's task is to help children give up their dependence on oral language strategies and to help them develop a new repertoire of written strategies. However, it must not be overlooked that depending upon oral language strategies is appropriate in situations where their use makes communication efficient and effective. Teachers should help children expand their repertoire of strategies, but they also need to teach them when particular strategies are appropriate and when they are not. When teachers require the use of literate strategies in situations where an oral language strategy is appropriate, they may be confusing the issue for children. The example below illustrates some of the difficulties surrounding this issue. The example of "sharing" is taken from the same first grade class as were other

examples in this paper.

Child. Yesterday, when I came home my mother took me to a store and I bought these.

Teacher: What are they?

Child: Little Jingle Bells.

The example illustrates how the teacher's questioning strategy prompts the child to produce decontextualized language rather than situation dependent language. The teacher is prompting the child to name the object, i.e., to make the reference lexically explicit as one would in written language. However, in this example, the child's deictic use of the plural demonstrative (these) to refer to the jingle bells is appropriate. It is a face-to-face situation, the teacher and the class can see the bells, and it is unnecessary to name objects when they are in plain sight. Thus in this example, although the child's language strategy is appropriate, there is some reason to question the appropriateness of the teacher's intervention. The teacher`s strategy appears to be to get the child to produce literate language even though it is not communicatively appropriate. If the class could not see the object, or if the child was describing an experience that was not shared, then an intervention strategy of asking for more explicit language would be communictively appropriate.

The teacher's strategy is typical of the literate bias of many school tasks of which the admonition to speak in full sentences is the most pervasive example. Asking children to produce language that is innappropriate for the communicative situation may have the effect of blurring the distinction between oral and written language that the child needs to learn. Moreover, the problem of a literate bias is not limited to teachers. In evaluating the language of working class and dialect speaking children, researchers have, in the past, ignored the communicative or pragmatic appropriateness of these children's language performance in school like tasks and claimed their language was deficient because it didn't conform to literate expectations (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Bernstein, 1971).

For teachers, it seems that the instructional task is twofold. Teachers need to help children acquire a repertoire of written language strategies and, at the same time, they need to help children become aware of the pragmatic differences among different kinds and types of oral and writen discourse. This means that teachers will not only need to be aware of the language strategies that children use, but that they will also have to be aware of their own teaching strategies and the communicative appropriateness of their strategies for helping children make the transition from oral to written language.

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Figure 1: Features of Oral and Written Language Differences

Level I	Level II		Level III		
Differences	Features of the Context		Features of Language Use		
			Oral		Written
Background Knowledge →	Shared knowledge	+	Omit or refer to Shared Knowledge	-	Explicit Detailed
Situation →	Multiple Channels	+	Nonverbal, Intonation Lexical	-	Lexical
Situation →	Planning	-	Fragmented	+	Integrated
Situation →	Feedback	+	Disjointed Simple	-	Coherent Complex
Situation →	Shared time and space	+	Situation-dependent	-	Text-dependent